

Stay With Me Stay by evendanstevens

Category: Stranger Things (TV 2016)

Genre: Anxiety, Developing Relationship, Drama, Eventual Smut, F/M, Fluff and Angst, High School, Joyce and Hopper Teenage Years, Joyce and Hopper history, Romance, only slightly slow burn, will eventually catch up with post season 2

Language: English

Characters: Benny Hammond, Bob Newby, Chrissy Carpenter, Jim "Chief" Hopper, Joyce Byers, Karen Wheeler, Lonnie Byers

Relationships: Joyce Byers & Jim "Chief" Hopper, Joyce Byers/Jim "Chief" Hopper

Status: In-Progress

Published: 2017-11-08

Updated: 2018-01-03

Packaged: 2022-04-03 15:13:33

Rating: Mature

Warnings: Creator Chose Not To Use Archive Warnings

Chapters: 6

Words: 20,326

Publisher: archiveofourown.org

Summary:

Before they were venturing into the Upside Down and fighting interdimensional monsters, Joyce Byers and Jim Hopper were just two teenagers trying to get through their senior year of Hawkins High. And despite everything that has happened, Joyce and Hopper just can't seem to stop thinking about the events that transpired between them prior to the disappearance of Will Byers.

1. The Reappearance of Joyce Donnelly

Author's Note:

I finally finished season 2 and I can't get enough of these two. I know I shipped them in Season 1 but this season was EVERYTHING. So here's my take on what happened between Joyce and Hopper in high school and the history they share. This story will be split into two parts, with the first half looking at Joyce and Hopper's relationship through high school eventually leading up to the second half which will take place after Season 2.

The story title is taken from the Stevie Nicks song 'Leather and Lace', my personal Jopper anthem.

Hope you enjoy the first chapter!

Chapter 1 - The Reappearance of Joyce Donnelly

On the last day of summer vacation in 1961, Jim Hopper was watching his friend Benny Hammond clean up his bloody nose for what Hopper hoped would be the last time for at least a couple of weeks. They were sitting by the lake, deep in the heart of the forest, a common spot for the teens of Hawkins High to drink their parents stolen liquor where the police and responsible adults were too far away to hear or disturb them. Over the course of that summer, Benny and Hopper had regularly visited there during the day where Hopper would indulge in his new found habit of smoking. It had also become their unofficial retreat from when either of them would get in a fist fight which incidentally happened more than the pair would've liked.

This time round it had been Lonnie Byers to burst Benny's nose. As Hopper looked at his friend, an absolute beast of a boy, with a large build with a big, long head, it was easy to see why the coaches at their high school had practically begged him to join the wrestling team. It was to their dismay, however, to find that Benny was nothing but a gentle giant who was too concerned that he had hurt his opponent to actually learn how to successfully wrestle someone.

But one thing that eclipsed his hatred for violence was his loyalty to his friend. And unfortunately for Benny, Hopper more than often found himself on the receiving end of a right hook causing Benny to almost constantly intervene to defend him.

Lonnie had been upset that Hopper was now seeing Chrissy Carpenter, an ex of Byers and had decided to round up his gang of greaser assholes to ambush Hopper and Benny on their way home from their shift at Hopper's father's auto shop. Lonnie had only gotten one punch in when Benny tackled Byers to the ground, only for the boy to run away at the mere sight of a police officer across the street.

And now Benny was hissing as he pinched the bridge of his still bleeding nose and Hopper couldn't help but feel guilty. To help with the guilt, Hopper reached into the inside pocket of his brown leather jacket and fished out his pack of Camels, popping one into this mouth and lighting it with his trusted Zippo.

"Don't worry about Lonnie, man, he won't be on your ass for too long," Benny said, surprising him Hopper, considering he was the one nursing his wound yet comforting reassuring Hopper.

"Oh really?" Hopper half laughed as he took a drag of his cigarette and exhaled a concentrated cloud of smoke. "And what makes you say that?"

Benny pulled the tissue from his nose and inspected it, satisfied to the see the amount of blood gushing from his nose was now calming down. "Jonathan Donnelly was in Dad's diner this morning. I overheard him say that Joyce arrived back last night and that she starts school tomorrow."

Jim Hopper felt his heart stop beating as the words left Benny's mouth. Joyce, his childhood crush of almost fourteen years, was back. A year ago, her mother had died and Joyce... well Joyce hadn't taken it well. At sixteen years of age, Joyce had suffered her first mental breakdown and her father had thought it best she go stay with her Aunt Darlene in Chicago. The last time Jim had seen Joyce was when he'd gone round to her house to say goodbye, and maybe even finally tell her how he felt about her. But when he'd seen the tears in those beautiful big brown eyes, he'd thought it best he didn't say anything. Instead he'd given her a quick embrace, promised to

write and watched her father drive her away.

But of course, a lot changed in a year, and Hopper had neglected his promise to keep in contact. He'd started working at his father's autoshop, was dating one of the most popular girls at Hawkins high, had been dating even more girls before that, had his rivalries with Lonnie Byers, Ted Wheeler and Dick Holland, and Joyce just seemed to slip away from his priorities. That wasn't to say, however, that he didn't think about her. Whenever a happy yet melancholy song came on the radio, whenever a thunder storm ripped through Hawkins or whenever a pretty brunette girl tucked her hair behind her ear similar to the way she had when she was nervous, he'd think of her then. But when the thoughts of her came, so did the guilt and sadness and longing and he didn't like those feelings one bit.

"Our school?" was the most intelligent response Hopper could think of when posed with such information.

Benny chuckled knowingly. "Yeah well no shit, Jim, of course she's going to our school. Jonny Byers doesn't have two dimes to rub together, never mind the cash to send her to some prep school."

"I was just asking," Jim irritably snapped back causing the amused grin on Benny's face to only grow.

"Just asking what?" a girl's voice came from behind Hopper, causing him to whip his head round. As if on cue, here came Chrissy Carpenter to remind him just how truly life had changed for him since the last time Joyce was in Hawkins. Chrissy was a pretty girl there was no denying that, with her shoulder length, perfectly curled blonde hair and flattering pink poodle skirt that always looked like she was getting her first wear out of it. But with pretty came a mean streak, one of the main reasons Hopper had liked her. She was intimidating and smart, with a smile so sweet but a tongue capable of spitting venom.

When she arrived at the two boys, Hopper reached up with his neck as she bent down to give him a welcoming kiss before sitting herself in his lap. She scrunched her nose up at Hopper's cigarette and delicately took it out of his mouth before stubbing it out on the rock beneath him without a word, instead smiling at him with those

perfect white pearls. He hated when she did that but hey, he liked screwing her so he was willing to put up with it. She turned around to Benny as if to silently ask him what they were talking about, not once taking the time to remark on Benny's bloody nose.

"Joyce Donnelly is back in town," Benny sounded bored already when he spoke. Benny did not like Chrissy.

Especially when Chrissy let out one of her spine tingling mean girl giggles she used whenever she was laughing at someone. "Jesus Christ, that wacko?! Didn't she go totally nuts one day in the middle of homeroom and destroyed Mrs Hemp's classroom?"

Benny and Hopper didn't answer. Once upon a time the three had been friends, and while they had drifted from Joyce they still felt a twinge of awkwardness and guilt whenever someone mocked her, never joining in on the banter. It was true what Chrissy had said, Hopper had witnessed it first-hand. One minute Joyce was staring at her desk, shaking ever so slightly but barely moving or breathing. The next she was hysterically crying and screaming, flipping her desk over and throwing whatever she could throw all over the place. Hopper had gone to calm her down only to have Mr Thomson, the gym teacher, drag him away as the school nurse subdued her. It had been eight days after her mother's death, and while decent people like Benny and Hopper, hell, even Lonnie Byers, understood. To others, the episode had gained her a reputation of 'crazy'.

"Jeez, it sure is gonna be one interesting senior year with that nutcase back," Chrissy sniggered harshly.

Hopper only half agreed with her. It really was going to be an interesting year.

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The next morning in the school parking lot, Hopper was unexpectedly nervous, tapping his fingers in quick time against the steering wheel. He had just finished his cigarette and found himself flicking it out his window only to reach into his pack and pull out another, lighting it robotically as his eyes scanned the people and cars in front of him. Benny remarked with disgust as he began chain smoking but Hopper

paid him no attention as he continued to stare out at the crowd, looking for the familiar face.

Benny could only smirk to himself as he watched the nervous wreck that was his friend. He knew fine well who Hopper was anxious to see, and when his eyes widened every time he saw the back of a brunette girl's head step out of a car Benny had to stop himself from laughing. Jim Hopper could convince everyone he was a quiet, angry, badass with one hell of a right hook but he couldn't fool Benny. Benny was reminded of when they were in middle school at the Winter Snow Ball, the way Jim's eyes were pinned to the front door of the dance hall waiting for Joyce Donnelly to make her grand entrance. Of course back then, as excited as Jim had been to see her, he had never plucked up the courage to ask her dance and she'd ended up slow dancing to Sam Cooke with Lonnie Byers.

Benny doubted even now that he would pluck up the courage to tell Joyce how he felt, especially when he wouldn't even admit his feelings to himself. Checking his watch, Benny could see it was time to head in.

"Come on, man. She's obviously late or maybe I misheard Mr Donnelly, we gotta go to class," Benny nudged Hopper slightly to gesture to get him to leave the car but Hopper's eyes stayed glued to the front. He didn't answer and instead kept looking. Sighing to himself, Benny opened his door and got out only to run into Chrissy who'd caught sight of Hopper sitting waiting in his truck.

"Sweetie come on I'm right here!" Chrissy cooed into the rolled down window, snapping Jim out of his trance. Benny could have sworn he'd seen something similar to irritation flash in Hopper's eyes before he forced a smile as his girlfriend and stepped out of the car. Chrissy came round to meet him and Hopper kissed her with open eyes, not even looking at her. As she took his hand and led him toward the front door, Jim looked over his shoulder one more time but still failed to see that small brown eyed girl amongst the crowd and sighed with defeat as he let Chrissy lead the way.

It was during lunch that Hopper's hope began to dwindle. It was half way through the day and despite his best efforts, he hadn't caught a glimpse of her, not even someone who looked vaguely like her. Even

now as he scanned the cafeteria picking at his ham sandwich, he couldn't see shit. He figured perhaps Benny had been right about being wrong and Hopper couldn't help but feel a little disappointed. True he had no idea what he would even have said to Joyce if he had seen her. But even he couldn't deny the excitement he'd felt the night before at the idea of seeing her again, it had been surprising and exhilarating and terrifying all at once, and it was a feeling that Jim couldn't ignore.

But as he realised those feelings now appeared to be for nothing, they became a lot easier to ignore. Now all he felt was frustrated and emotionally drained. So what better distraction than to lightly kick Chrissy from under the table and gesture to the window. The pair got up from the table almost immediately and headed to the bleachers.

Under the bleachers was the unofficially designated spot for all couples to make out during classes. Despite the teachers best efforts to patrol the area, many of them just found it awkward and the area was mostly kept unmonitored. So naturally, Jim and Chrissy had utilised the spot more than a few times. And now they were under the bleachers, with Chrissy practically devouring his mouth with her own.

Hopper hadn't really been as into it as he had hoped, his mind still miles away on the day's disappointment but nevertheless he would keep kissing Chrissy until those feelings drifted away. She had him pinned up against the back of bleachers with her hands in his hair. He had his arms wrapped around her waist, pulling her close to him. When Jim slipped his tongue into her mouth and collided with her own, Chrissy's hands tightened on his hair and she moaned into his mouth. She moved her head to the left, inviting him to her neck and Jim followed suit, placing quick kisses down her throat and Chrissy sighed.

"Oh, Jimmy," she panted in his ear. That was another thing Hopper hated about Chrissy, when she called him 'Jimmy'. It made him feel like an inadequate kid, after all that's what his mother had called him up until he was thirteen when he less-than-politely asked her stopped. Jim figured he was too far along now to tell her to stop.

As his lips travelled back up again and met her lips, the pair were

interrupted by the cough. Hopper knew cold season was well over and the cough wasn't meant as a symptom, but that of someone announcing their presence. Chrissy pulled away from Jim to give whoever had disturbed them a sneer but her face fell when she looked at the cougher. Jim couldn't see from where he had been pinned and stepped forward to look at the person in question.

For the second time in twenty four hours, Jim Hopper felt his heart stop beating.

The girl that stood before him looked almost completely different to the last time he'd seen her. The girl was not dressed in a red and white checked shirtwaist dress, instead she was dressed in tight black trousers, cropped half way down her shin, biker boots, a black and white striped, long sleeve shirt and that hung just off her shoulders under a black, tasselled leather jacket. Her hair was no longer shoved up into a messy but sensible bun, but instead her naturally curled, thick brunette hair flowed free in a centre parting that stopped just two inches below her collar bone. And from her red painted lips, a freshly lit cigarette dangled.

Joyce Donnelly, the sweet young girl he'd known only a year ago, had transformed into what could only be described as the woman of Jim Hopper's dreams. And as he looked at her now, taking a drag of her cigarette, those beautiful brown orbs staring at him deeply, Hopper felt a stir in the pit of his stomach and took a deep breath to calm him.

"Joyce," Chrissy surprised tone brought Hopper back down to Earth, yet he continued to stare at Joyce in a trance. "I didn't know you were back in town..." Chrissy lied in an attempt to break the awkwardness.

"Just got back yesterday," Joyce exhaled a long line of smoke, Hopper's eyes infatuated with the small 'o' her mouth made. Her eyes didn't leave Hopper as she did so, sending a shiver down his spine.

"I see," Chrissy said and looked at Hopper, expecting him to say something. When he didn't, Chrissy slowly took his hand and began to pull him backwards, leading him away. "Well we'll see you around, nice to have you back," Chrissy's forced kindness did nothing

for Joyce as she continued to stare at Hopper. She said nothing.

When Chrissy realised Hopper wouldn't budge, she let go of his hand and walked away herself, expecting him to follow. Instead he lingered for a moment, taking in the sight of Joyce Donnelly, absolutely in awe of her. When she didn't say anything and the sound of Chrissy's footsteps began to fade, he started to walk away from her when she finally spoke.

"It's good to see you, Hop," Joyce simply said as she went to inhale from her cigarette again. Jim couldn't do anything but smirk, the sound of the name only Joyce called him, the name only Joyce was allowed to call him, was like music to his ears. It had been too long. She gave him a small knowing smile as Jim turned on his heel and walked away from her, smiling to himself.

It really was good to see her again.

2. Time Can Do So Much

Summary for the Chapter:

Hopper has a surprise visitor.

Notes for the Chapter:

oh my goodness thank you so much for all your kudos! I know I only posted yesterday but I'm going away this weekend so wasn't sure how much writing I'd get done so really wanted to get this chapter done and posted so apologies that it's not as long as I had hoped. Hope you enjoy this chapter, title is taken from 'Unchained Melody' by the Righteous Brothers cause hey you can't go wrong with a classic!

Chapter 2

That evening, Hopper was sitting in his room listening to 'Walk Don't Run' by the Ventures for what felt like the fifteenth time, trying to dull out the sound of his parents drunkenly slow dancing in the front room. Since his father had bought the auto shop, things had been a lot happier in the Hopper household. It felt like they'd been celebrating their success every night for the past year, most nights ending like they did tonight, his parents having one too many glasses of wine and gushing over each other. As damaging as it was to Hopper's 'image', he couldn't help but enjoy this peaceful serenity that had taken over their lives.

But Hopper would never forget what their lives had been before. He wouldn't forget the nights his father drank whiskey rather than wine. He wouldn't forget his father spitting at Jim how much of a disappointment he was. He wouldn't forget his father teaching him how to fight in one way or another. He wouldn't forget his mother crying herself to sleep most nights when she hadn't drank herself to the point of unconsciousness. He remembered all of it. And there was no amount of success or money or laughs that could erase it all from Jim's memory.

In the midst of the music and laughter, Hopper heard a soft knock on the front door of the house. It appeared his parents had heard it too, as the music ceased to play and the sound of his mother's kitten heels clicking against the wooden hallway leading to the front door could be heard from Jim's room. As curious as he was, Jim rolled over his bed and gently removed the needle from record player so he could listen to whoever it was that was at the door.

He couldn't make out his mother's words but she spoke in a high pitched excited voice that Jim rarely heard. His interest peaked and Jim made his way out of his bedroom door to go see who it was.

His heart leapt when he caught sight of Joyce standing in the doorway smiling kindly at his mother.

"Jim look who it is!" Mrs Hopper announced waving an arm at Joyce who gave a small smile wave.

"Hey, Hop," Joyce said quietly, almost nervously.

Jim didn't realise the rather large smile on his face until he started speaking. "Joyce, hey! Um," he found himself stuttering. "What—eh, what um, what're you doing here?" he put a hand round the back of his neck and rubbed it, suddenly very aware of his hands and unsure what to do with them.

"Joyce here came to see if you two wanted to go and catch up? Isn't that sweet?" Mrs Hopper beamed at Jim. His mother had always been fond of Joyce, their mothers had been friends in high school and his mother had gone round to her house every day with Jim after her mother died.

Jim's smile couldn't help but grow. "Yeah sure, I'll just grab my jacket," Jim gestured behind him like an idiot and practically ran to grab his jacket. While it was still summer, the nights still tended to get cold. He'd noticed Joyce was wearing practically the same outfit from earlier in the day except now she donned a grey sweater rather than the stripped top she had been wearing. As he took his coat from his room, he couldn't help but stop and fix his hair in the mirror before darting out.

When he came out, Joyce and Mrs Hopper were chatting pleasantly and quietly. When he stepped into Joyce's eye view her eyes shone up at him and she smiled. "Shall we?" she nodded to the door and Jim could only nod in return as he rushed out the house after Joyce, his mother shouting behind him to be back before eleven.

When they were far enough away from the house, Jim finally spoke.

"Hey, so umm, sorry about being weird earlier," he was rubbing his neck with nerves again. He stole a glance at Joyce, so tiny in height compared to him. She was staring straight ahead with a content expression on her face. "I just wasn't expecting to see you and let's be honest you look a lot dif-"

"Hop, it's fine don't sweat I totally get it," Joyce looked up at him with a reassuring smile and Hopper felt a rush of relief flow over him.

They were silent for a bit as they walked along the street. It wasn't quite dark yet, still relatively bright out but the street lamps were lit and the street deserted and quiet. It looked almost nice.

"So how have you been anyway? How was Chicago?" Jim asked a bit quicker and enthusiastically than he would of liked.

Joyce nodded, a small smile on her lips like she was amused with the way Jim anxiously had asked her. "Chicago was good. I really loved being in the city, a lot of cool people and music, but," she took a deep sigh as she looked around her and crossed her arms across her chest, shrugging. "There's just something about home, y'know?" she gave him a look like she expected an answer but didn't expect him to say anything. He nodded silently in agreement. "And what about you? I see your dad owns the auto shop now," she asked as though it was ten times more exciting than it actually was.

"Yeah, he's real proud of it," Jim nodded. He knew Joyce remembered how things had been in his family before she left, but he knew she didn't want to pry so she wouldn't say anything.

Instead she smiled, almost to herself. "I'm still kinda disappointed he didn't rename it as the 'auto hop,'" she let out a small laugh.

Jim snorted at her awful joke and he nudged her playfully. “That was terrible and you know it,” he chuckled.

Joyce let out a bigger laugh this time at the sound of Hopper’s deep laugh. “Yeah it was pretty dreadful, I’ll admit.” As they walked along, Jim pulled out his pack of cigarettes and offered her one. With wide surprised eyes, Joyce accepted and watched in bewilderment as Hopper took one for himself and placed it in his mouth. “Well Jim Hopper!” she proclaimed, completely aghast. “I didn’t know you smoke!”

Jim smirked as he pulled out his lighter and sparked up his cigarette before passing the lighter to Joyce. “Well, what can I say, there’s a lot you don’t know about me now,” he said, almost jokingly.

Joyce lit up and exhaled a small cloud of smoke. “Yeah, well who’s fault is that now?”

Jim felt his throat tighten and his stomach churn, her accusation piercing him. “Joyce, I...”

“Relax Hop!” she laughed cheerfully. “I’m just busting your balls man!” she lightly punched his bicep and Jim looked at her, rather confused. As she walked in front of him and turned to face him, walking backwards Jim took a moment to see how much she’d really changed. This Joyce wasn’t the same quiet, bookish, shy girl he’d known way back when.

This Joyce seemed confident, playful and overall happier.

She grinned at him for a moment before reading his expression. “Jeez, what’s up with you, when did you get so tense?” she raised her brows at him.

He smiled at that and shook his head. “It’s nothing, it’s just...” he trailed off for a second. “You seem different, Joyce,” he told her honestly.

She looked away as if in thought before staring at the ground in front of her and shrugged. “Well, what can I say, a lot can happen in a year, Hop,” she brushed it off casually.

"Yeah you're telling me," he raised his eyebrows in agreement before taking another draw of his cigarette.

She came back round to his side. "But not you, Hop. You haven't changed," he could hear the smile in her voice. "You're still the same old brooding hardass I once knew."

As they walked they came to the clearing by the lake. Joyce had been here before and he caught her staring out at the water fondly. The pair used to swim there as kids in the summer. One day they'd made their own tire swing when they were twelve. It turned out to be rather terrible construction of their part and Jim had gone flying and broken his arm. After he'd finished screaming and crying to Joyce in pain, he'd made her promise not to tell people he'd cried. Joyce had agreed and kept his secret. God forbid people knew Jim Hopper had feelings.

Joyce perched herself on the rock by the lakeside where he and Benny had sat just the day before. She brought her knees up to her chin and Hopper sat down across from her, stretching his legs out in front of him. He slyly watched as Joyce looked ahead of her, a small, remembering smile playing on her lips when suddenly something came across her mind and she looked at Hopper, all wide eyed again.

"Although there is something about you that has changed," she observed taking a drag thoughtfully.

He raised a questioning brow at her. "Oh really? And what would that be?"

She snorted. "Since when did you start dating that total square, Chrissy Carpenter?!"

He had to laugh at that. Joyce and Jim, always the outcasts. "That is a pretty new development," he laughed, pulling his heels back and crossing his arms over his now elevated knees. "She's not as awful as you'd think," he said half-heartedly.

Joyce made an unconvinced scoff but Jim didn't dare defend himself. After a moment, Joyce appeared to have worked up the courage to ask her next question. "So is she your first then?" she looked up at

him through long lashes.

“First what?”

“Don’t be coy now, Hop,” she almost groaned. He was really going to make her say it. “Your first sexual partner.”

Jim smiled triumphantly as Joyce made a uncomfortable expression as the words left her mouth. He raised his eyes then. “No actually,” Jim admitted, almost sheepishly. “It was actually Brenda, then Susan, then Linda, and then Chrissy,” he looked away, a small blush rising to his cheeks as he took a small drag of his cigarette before stubbing it out.

Joyce’s jaw practically dropped to the floor and her eyes grew bigger. “Fuck, Hop,” she sighed, shaking her head before amusingly smirking at him. “You’ve been busy,” she gestured at him with her cigarette before she too discarded hers.

“Yeah, yeah, yeah..” Jim muttered, his eyes shining before turning his head back to Joyce. “What about you? You still gonna be having a white wedding?”

Joyce shook her head, embarrassed and stared at her hands. “No, actually,” she said, instantly surprising Jim. “There was this guy in Chicago, we dated for a while but it didn’t last long. But long enough, y’know.”

Jim didn’t expect the unfamiliar and unwanted feelings to wash over him but nevertheless they did. He felt anger, disappointment, envy... He cursed himself internally. Hopper felt jealous. Jealousy toward some random guy in Chicago he’d never met but now wanted to punch him for even touching Joyce.

His Joyce.

Hopper pushed the dangerous thought to the back of his head and quickly changed the subject.

“So you suppose this is you back in Hawkins then? For good then,” he asked almost hopeful.

She smirked at him, her brown eyes sparkled at him in the arriving

moonlight. “Careful, Jim, you almost sounded like you missed me for a second there,” she gave him a mischievous look there that almost sent his heart flying out his chest.

Get it together, Jim.

“So what if I did, Joyce?” he shrugged nonchalantly before he smiled at her. “I did miss you,” he admitted, besides lying was something he never easily could do to her.

“But not enough to write to me...” Joyce said quietly, a hint of sadness in her tone that chipped away at his heart. “Why didn’t you write me, Hop? I’m not mad, I just...” she trailed off again. “Why didn’t you?”

Jim sighed, he’d known this was coming and he still wasn’t sure if he could give her a straight answer. “Honestly,” Jim began before sighing. “I don’t really know. I wanted to write you but every time I sat down to, I just...” he looked away from her then, the expecting look in her eyes too much for him. “I wanted to tell you everything, everything that happened to me but... it just wouldn’t have been the same. I just wanted to be talking to you, not writing,” he looked back at her and saw her staring at her hands again. “It was selfish of me, I’m sorry.”

She looked up at him then, he expected to see those same glassy eyes he’d seen whenever she was sad or upset but there was none. Instead she got up unexpectedly and sat down next to him and put her hand over his, gazing at him with kind eyes that made him catch his breath ever so quietly.

“Well,” she shrugged again. “I’m here now,” she turned her lips up into a calming smile. “So what’s been going on?”

The pair sat like that for hours, smoking cigarettes and sharing stories of their year apart. Jim talked about the auto shop, his fights, him and Benny’s regular shenanigans with teachers and such. Joyce talked about the wonders of the city, of the friends she’d made and her aunt Darlene introducing her to all kinds of new music. They could’ve sat there for even longer, laughing and catching up before Joyce let out a sleepy yawn and rested her head on his shoulder.

He stood up then and pulled her up by her hands, deciding the time was now to walk her home. They shared a cigarette en route and chatted a bit more before they reached Joyce's driveway on Old Cherry Road. As they said their goodbyes, Joyce stood up on her tiptoes and wrapped her arms around his neck and pulled him close.

Jim had hesitated for a moment before wrapping his arms tightly around her. They had never been like this. There was something differently intimate about the way they were holding each other. For some reason, they held each other tighter than either of them had the day Joyce had left for Chicago. He turned his head and bent down to bury his nose in the nape of her neck, smelling her hair. She smelled of cigarettes and fruity shampoo and it instantly sent warmth through him, a warmth he could've sworn he'd never felt before.

As they broke apart with Joyce pulling away, she murmured a 'goodnight, Hop' to him before heading inside.

As Jim walked home, kicking a stone along the way as he went, he thought to himself that a lot really *had* changed in a year. And when he got home and into his bed, he fell asleep smiling.

3. So Right, So Warm and True

Summary for the Chapter:

Joyce becomes part of the gang.

Notes for the Chapter:

Thank you all so much for all your kudos and comments. No plans on going away this week and I am LOVING writing this so expect another update soon. For now, enjoy some more Joyce and Hopper friendly fluff!

Chapter 3

The next day at school, Hopper was in the car park again, his arms looped around Chrissy's waist, his back against the side of his truck. She was saying something about cheerleading try outs and how her and Karen Michaels were in charge of selecting the new recruits but Jim wasn't really listening. Instead, his eyes were scanning the car park again. There was something different about the way he was holding Chrissy, the way her finger traced his chest didn't excite him anymore, didn't tempt him to pull her closer. This time, Chrissy's voice was like white noise and he might as well have been looking right through her.

Luckily for Jim, Chrissy was the type of girl to get too caught up in talking about herself that she didn't seem to know nor care if anyone was still listening to her. And she didn't seem to notice when Jim's eyes suddenly became fixated on what he had been looking for.

Joyce walked out of her father's car, book bag practically hanging off of her shoulder as she aimlessly tried to pull it up her arm whilst still trying to juggle the books she already had in her arms. As amusing as the sight was, he was still compelled to go help her. But the girl currently in his arms prevented him from doing so. So instead he watched for a moment as she struggled before a leather jacket clad, gelled haired boy was at her side lifting her bag for her over her shoulder. The boy towered over, despite being not that tall but it was

easy for anyone to tower over Joyce with her 5'3, skinny frame. Hopper felt that uneasy anger flow through him again when she watched Joyce smile up at the boy.

Lonnie fucking Byers.

Of course he had swooped in the second he had a chance. While Jim and Lonnie had often come to blows, a rivalry that had lasted ever since elementary school, Jim had always had Joyce on his side. And everyone knew that Lonnie had wanted Joyce since he was twelve. And now here he was coming to her rescue and she was looking up at him with adoration and dreamy eyes that Jim hadn't seen before. It made the muscle in his neck tighten.

Chrissy had noticed then that Jim was not paying attention to her at long last and moved her body around to see what he was looking at. The feel of Chrissy turning was just enough for Jim to take his eyes off the scene and back to his girlfriend. When Chrissy caught sight of what he'd been looking at it, she flashed Jim a knowing warning look before continuing her conversation like nothing had happened.

It was then that Joyce spotted Jim whilst Lonnie was talking to her. When their eyes looked her lips curled into a shy smirk and she stared at her feet before tucking her hair behind her left ear. Jim felt like he couldn't move, impatiently anxious as to her next move. Was she going to come over and talk to him? God, he hoped so. But instead his heart dropped when her eyes went back to Lonnie and she laughed at something he said.

Jim frowned as the morning bell rang and Joyce and Lonnie walked side by side into the building.

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At lunch, Jim had been late to the cafeteria after Mr Cooper held him back for disrupting his class by loudly drumming on his desk in boredom. He'd told him to 'cut this crap out, James, you're a senior now' and Jim had almost told him to suck it before realising he was hungry and just wanted to get out of there as soon as possible. After grabbing his lunch, he'd made his way into the sea of lunch tables, sneaking a glance at the greaser table headed by Lonnie Byers.

Surprisingly, Joyce was not in amongst their heard of posers like Jim had been expecting. He'd fully expected her encounter with Lonnie that morning to be cause enough for her to go sit with him and no longer talk to Jim. He felt like a dumbass for thinking that when he pulled up to his own table to find Joyce sat wedged in between Benny and Karen. He stopped for a moment and smiled to himself before sitting down next to Chrissy who looked less than thrilled as Joyce spoke intently with their friend Richie Adams.

"Well excuse me, Donnelly," Jim announced as he slid into his seat putting his tray down in front of him. Joyce whipped her head round at him with an expectant eyebrow raise. "I don't remember inviting you to our illustrious lunch table?" he joked at her, picking up his sandwich and taking a disastrously large bite.

She feigned shock at him. "Well my apologies, I didn't realise there was a waiting list to watch you eat like a freaking dog. Tell me where do I sign up?"

"Oh, well, right here," he fumbled around in his pocket for a moment before pulling his finger out and flipping her off with a grin.

Joyce laughed and shook her head and returned the gesture before returning to the unappetising looking pasta in front of her. Jim kept his eyes on her for a moment, enjoying the way she continued to giggle to herself.

"So I take it you will all be at my party on Friday, right?" Karen perked up then drawing in everyone's attention.

"Sure I'll be there, if that dickhead Ted Wheeler isn't going to be there," Jim sneered, looking down at his sandwich with contempt. He was about to take another bite when he noticed the blush rise to Karen's cheeks. "Jesus, Karen don't tell me you invited him again!"

"What?! He's cute what was I supposed to do?!" Karen shrugged as if it was plainly obvious that she really did have no other option. Joyce smirked next to her.

"Oh, I don't know, only hook up with him the one time and leave it at that like you said you would!" Jim retorted. He really was not a

fan of Ted Wheeler, the guy talked far too much and when it did talk it was mostly shit coming out of his mouth. Not to mention, he was a total poser in his third year of college and still hanging around his old high school.

“I’m only human, Jim,” Karen sighed in defeat.

“And I guess that means Byers and Holland are invited then?” Jim grumbled and groaned when Karen looked away and ate a grape with guilt written all over her face.

“Oh come on, Lonnie isn’t that bad!” Joyce interceded and Jim flashed her a furious look. He honestly couldn’t believe Joyce was defending Jim’s sworn enemy.

Jim scoffed. “Did you just forget everything I told you about him last night?”

Jim realised his mistake when Chrissy was suddenly attentive to the conversation and she raised her head and snapped her head round to Hopper. “Wait, what happened last night?” Chrissy asked confused.

Jim looked between her and Joyce, who now looked equally as confused. “Joyce and I went for a walk by the lake, y’know, catching up,” Jim waved it off nonchalantly but that didn’t stop Chrissy making a passive aggressive ‘hmpf’ noise.

Karen quickly took the reins of the conversation so as to avoid another public Jim and Chrissy argument. “So, my parents leave at six if you guys want to come round for eight, is that okay with everyone?”

Joyce turned her attention back to Karen and nodded with an assuring smile. “I’ll be there!”

“Are you sure that’s a good idea, Joyce?” Chrissy chipped in there.

Benny spoke for everyone there when he asked, “What is that supposed to mean, Chrissy?”

“Well, y’know,” Chrissy suddenly became very aware of all the eyes on her then, awaiting her next words. She didn’t seem to care. “After

everything that's happened, maybe it wouldn't be wise to be in a party environment," she shrugged and rolled her eyes and took one of Karen's grapes and popped it into her mouth.

Jim looked at his girlfriend with his jaw practically on the floor and his eyebrows hitting the ceiling with astonishment. He wanted the ground to swallow him up in that moment, he could only imagine how Joyce felt when everyone's eyes turned to her.

Joyce, on the other hand, did not look offended or embarrassed as Chrissy's had hoped she would've felt. Instead her expression remained composed, her mouth in a straight line, her gaze unwavering. Jim, however, could see the anger behind her eyes. "I think I'll be just fine, Chrissy. But thank you ever so much for your concern, that's really considerate of you," Joyce faked a smile that could've cut through Chrissy like a knife. Jim noticed the amused smirk play on Benny's lips.

Chrissy rolled her eyes again and pursed her lips. After an awkward moment of silence, Chrissy obviously unable to think of a retort, she flipped her hair over her shoulder. "Come on, Karen, there's more try outs after lunch we better go get ready," Chrissy didn't give Karen time to respond as she had already stood up.

Karen looked irritated but kept her mouth shut. She gave Joyce an apologetic look before moving around and standing next to Chrissy, not meeting Chrissy's eyes. Chrissy turned to Jim then and bent down to his level, her hand going to his hair to brush it behind her ear.

"I'll see you after school, Jimmy," she purred seductively before attacking his lips with her own, kissing him a lot deeper than her usual goodbye peck. Jim kissed her back with only half as much enthusiasm, still mad at her for her Joyce comment. And he knew she wasn't kissing him like this because she wanted to. It was more because she knew Joyce was looking and Chrissy wanted to mark her territory.

She pulled away and then strutted off with Karen. Jim shifted his eyes to look at Joyce and found her staring at her pasta with unnecessary concentration. Benny picked up the conversation then the four people at the table where suddenly chatting amongst each

other like nothing had happened. When Joyce and Hopper had both finished their respective lunches, Jim pulled his cigarettes out of his pocket and tapped the box at Joyce, a silent offering. She had simply nodded and followed him out of the cafeteria.

He didn't lead her to the bleachers this time, not after the awkwardness that occurred there the day before. This time he led her to the steps round the side of the building. He stood with his back against the wall and slid down to sit, Joyce sitting down next to him. He pulled out two cigarettes and passed one to her as they lit up.

"So," Joyce started. "Why didn't you tell Chrissy about us meeting last night?" she asked, cutting right to the chase.

Hopper sighed, again unsure on what to tell her. It was a good question. Why hadn't he said anything to Chrissy about him and Joyce catching up? "Chrissy, she, uh," he stuttered trying to find an explanation on the spot. "She gets jealous pretty easily, I didn't think she'd take well to the idea of us, eh, out last night."

Joyce stared ahead of her and thought for a moment. "Does she have anything to be jealous about?" she asked innocently. She had turned to look up at him but Jim continued to look in front of him, considering her question.

Ultimately, he let out a chuckle and nudged her shoulder. "No, of course not, you're right," he was relieved when Joyce laughed with him in agreement. "What about you and Lonnie? You two looked pretty cosy this morning," he didn't mean for his tone to sound so irritated and betrayed but he couldn't take it back now. He saw Joyce smirk in the corner of his eye.

She shrugged. "He's sweet. Sweeter than you made him out to be," she smiled to herself, reflecting on her run in with Lonnie Byers earlier in the day. "He's nice to me," she said simply in an almost day dream like state.

Hopper huffed and took a draw of his cigarette. "Probably cause he just wants to get in your pants," he grumbled.

She gasped and that and whacked him in the arm. "Jim Hopper that

is enough!” she yelled at him but his face remained unchanged. “A guy can be nice to me without wanting to ‘get in my pants’ as you so eloquently put,” she challenged him. Instead he countered with a ‘yeah right’ eye roll and disbelieving grin. “Oh what, so I guess because you’re being nice to me because you want to sleep with me too, hmm?!”

Jim choked on his cigarette then and let out a chain of whooping coughs, taken completely off guard by her yet again. His reaction cause Joyce to throw her head back ever so slightly in a fit of giggles and she rested her head against his arm in a pitiful gesture. When Jim could finally breath again, his voice still sounded strangled but it didn’t hide his astonishment.

“Jesus, Joyce, that’s different, you and I have known each other since we were six!”

“So have me and Lonnie...”

“B-b-but you... you... me...”

Joyce was laughing again as Jim stumbled to find his words. Why did he keep getting like this around her? He was Jim fucking Hopper who took no shit from anyone, if anyone was supposed to be nervous and struggling to speak it should be her. But yet here she was, a tiny woman of a thing, teasing and laughing at him. And he couldn’t find it within himself to be annoyed at her as she laughed at his expense, always managing to verbal trip him. Instead he found it oddly endearing and refreshing, filling him with a warm feeling of happiness whenever her eyes sparkled up at him in the midst of a laughing fit. He couldn’t help but laugh with her.

“I’m just messing with you, *Jimmy*,” Joyce cooed, he turned his head to her and saw her bite her lip, holding back a laugh as she held back a laugh.

He shook his head and feigned a frown. “Oh don’t you start with that...”

Joyce couldn’t contain herself anymore when she let out a snort and suddenly she was laughing again. “Why do you let her call you that?”

"I don't know I guess it's gone on this long, I don't want to hurt her feelings..."

"And do you actually like when she calls you that?"

Jim paused for a second as Joyce calmed down her laughs with a sigh. "I fucking hate it."

And just like that they were killing themselves with laughter again.

4. Lady in Red

Summary for the Chapter:

The party at Karen's takes an unexpected turn.

Notes for the Chapter:

Oh my goodness thank you all so much for the kudos and comments! Sorry I didn't update as soon as I said I would but I really wanted to finish 'Talk Tonight' before I updated. Hope you all enjoy this chapter, where things take a turn for the angst-y.

Over the next three days, Hopper and Joyce were about as thick as thieves. With Chrissy busy all week with cheerleading practise, the pair were free to meet up each night, whether it be walking down to the lake, going for a drive in Jim's truck or even just going round to Joyce's house to listen to her new and improved record collection. Hopper had been surprised at just how much he enjoyed hanging out with Joyce. The two of them had never properly hung out just the two of them since middle school, yet there was a flawless comfort in how close the pair were getting in such a short amount of time.

On Friday, sitting under the steps between fifth and six period, which was quickly becoming their designated afternoon smoke break, Hopper had asked Joyce if she wanted to come over that night to listen to his Chuck Berry compilation.

"We can't tonight," Joyce had answered on a inhale. Jim gave her a questioning look as she exhaled and passed the cigarette to Jim. "We've got Karen's party."

Jim groaned and rolled his head back as he placed the cigarette between his lips. "Fuck, do we really need to go to that?" he turned his head to her and looked at her through pleading eyes and exhaled out of the side of his mouth. Joyce leaned her head back against the wall and looked up at him. Jim tried hard not to stare into those big brown orbs and tried to pretend like they hadn't started to drive him ever so crazy. It got even harder when she flashed him that little

smirk.

"Well I don't know about we, but I'm going," Joyce took the cigarette from Jim's fingers then turned away from him. "You have to go anyway, if Chrissy doesn't kill you for not going, Karen sure will." Jim let out a chuckle at that and took his head off the wall. "Besides, it could be fun," Joyce shrugged, taking a drag.

Jim sighed and ruffled his hair. "But Lonnie, and Ted and—"

"And you don't even have to talk to them!" Joyce contested, shaking her head at him. "C'mon, Chrissy will be there." Jim snorted, like that would convince him. "Benny, Richie they're all going," she looked up at him then. "I'm going."

Damn those eyes.

He exhaled in defeat and tilted his head back. "Okay fine..." he tried to contain his smile when she let out a short squeal of excitement and grasped his arm. "But if I go, and it all goes to shit, it'll be your fault, Donnelly."

"I know," she grinned up at him and Hopper cursed himself internally again.

And so there he was, standing outside Karen's door standing with Chrissy stood excitedly next to him. Chrissy had worn her signature pink colour in the form of a conservative dress with short sleeves, a high neck and puffy skirt. She'd done her hair in a loose beehive, and she did look pretty there was no doubt about it. There was just something rather plain about her that Hopper hadn't quite noticed before. Nevertheless, he had played the roll of doting boyfriend and picked her up to escort her to the party, as was expected of him. She'd given him a look when she saw that he was still in the same clothes he wore to school that day but he'd shrugged it off.

When Karen answered the door with a high pitched scream that made Hopper's ears ring, he figured she was already inebriated if the glass of white wine in her hand alone was anything to go by. He had rolled his eyes at that. Classic Karen, constantly wanting to grow up faster than the rest of them.

“You guys I’m so glad you came!” Karen screamed as she pulled them into the house and tightly wrapped her arms around Chrissy before gathering Hopper into a spine crushing hug.

As Hopper quickly scanned the house over Karen’s head he could see the party was in full swing. Music blared through the foyer from the living room and guys and gals were walking around and dancing. After all, Hopper had showed up about an hour later than Karen had requested. But in amongst the sea of progressively drunk teenagers, Hopper couldn’t quite find who he was looking for.

“Hey, Karen, you seen Joyce anywhere?” Hopper asked straight off the bat, ignoring the irritated and disapproving glare Chrissy was flashing him.

“Umm...” Karen looked over her shoulder and scanned the area before turning back to Jim with a frown. “I haven’t seen her she must be running late! But hey you make yourself at home, Benny and Richie are in the kitchen. Chrissy can you come with me for a minute?” Karen had already grabbed Chrissy’s hand and was dragging her away without letting her answer.

Hopper immediately headed to the kitchen and found Benny and Richie standing in the corner. Benny was attempting to talk up a pretty redhead girl who clearly had zero interest in him when he clocked Jim enter the room. Benny reached behind him and grabbed a beer and handed it to Hopper who nodded a thanks. After the redhead inevitably left, the trio began their regular discussion of quietly making fun of everyone else there. It wasn’t difficult in the case of some people, such as Ted Wheeler who’d shown up with a vintage bottle of red and was pretentiously spouting college drabble to Karen and three other enamoured girls.

Ted had caught the trio laughing at him but simply glared at them rather than start a round of verbal blows as per what usually happened. Hopper figured that tonight he was trying to keep his cool in front of Karen. Dick Holland, however, didn’t have a problem telling them to fuck off and challenging them to a fight outside, which Hopper had less than politely declined when Chrissy came over and wrapped her arms around his waist.

They were mid-make out session when Hopper's ears perked up at Karen's excited scream rang through the house.

"Joyce! You're here!"

Hopper had pulled away from Chrissy perhaps a little too quickly to stick his head out of the kitchen door to catch a glimpse of Joyce. And when he did, he felt his grasp on Chrissy's waist immediately loosen.

Joyce was dressed in red, a colour rarely seen on her. The dress had a lace bodice, no sleeves, with a long skater skirt. It flattered her otherwise skinny figure in a way Hopper had never known possible. Her hair was messily pinned up, but charming nonetheless. And of course there was that red lipstick she had worn that day he'd first seen her again. And even as she looked around nervously, looking more than a little out of place, she was undeniably stunning.

When her eyes came up to meet his, it was the first indication that he'd started walking towards her. A smile just about met his lips when it suddenly turned into a frown.

Lonnie Byers had come up behind her and draped his arm around her shoulders and Jim made the horrifying realisation that the pair had come to the party, together.

"Hopper, hey!" Joyce's joyful smile and voice had almost been enough to calm Hopper down. *Almost.*

"Hey, Jim," Lonnie said in a voice so smug it made Hopper want to punch him square in the jaw right there and then. And when Lonnie grinned at him like a shark, a toothpick between his teeth, the temptation only grew.

Jim tore his eyes away from Lonnie's more than punchable face and instead turned to Joyce who was looking at him nervously.

"Hey, Joyce," Jim said in a low voice, no indication of emotion. Joyce's expression only continued to fall as she looked between Lonnie, smiling like a Cheshire cat, and Jim, looking like he was a second away from committing a murder.

"So glad you came!" Joyce expressed with a forced enthusiasm in an attempt to lower the tension. Unfortunately it didn't do anything as Jim still looked miserable.

He shrugged and looked away from her with an ignorant sniff. "Well, y'know, I said I would, so."

When it became clear to Joyce that Hopper was in no mood for small talk, Lonnie began to lead her away saying something about there was people he wanted her to meet. Joyce had muttered a shy 'bye' to Jim who still wouldn't look at her.

When Jim watched her take one last sad look at him, he immediately felt guilty. He wasn't mad at Joyce, he was mad at Lonnie. Yet it wasn't Lonnie he was taking it out on, it was poor Joyce. Hopper was supposed to be his friend, so why did he care who she went to parties with? He had greeted Karen pleasantly enough and she was here with Ted freakin Wheeler for Christ's sake. So why was Joyce showing up with Lonnie making him so god damn angry?

He didn't have that much time to think about it much more before Benny had popped up behind Jim, placed a hand on his shoulder and a beer in his hand, leading him away from staring at Joyce while she laughed and joked with Lonnie.

For the rest of the party, Jim was practically miserable. He had tried to steer clear of Joyce and Lonnie as best he could, but he still caught glances of him that made the pit of his stomach tighten. He had reluctantly watched Lonnie wrap his arms around Joyce's waist and pull her close, watched her whisper in her ear and make her smile at him, unable to look away despite how angry it made him. She could do better than Lonnie, she could do so much better. But when he tried to think of an example, anyone else that came to mind made him equally infuriated. He'd taken a swig of his beer to wash away those dangerous thoughts and tried to focus on having fun with his friends and Chrissy, but every time he looked up, he couldn't help but scan the room for her.

Sometime during the night, Jim had realised Chrissy had had far too much to drink as she slurred her words and her eyes wildly swiped in different directions. While he tried to steady her, he noticed the red

flash of Joyce's dress heading up the stairs, alone. He looked on after her with a puzzled expression but when Chrissy heaved and threatened to throw up on his shirt, he snapped his attention back to the drunken girl in his arms.

He'd flashed down Karen who was currently sucking face with Ted and looked less than pleased at Jim's disruption. She vaguely gestured for him to take her to the downstairs guest bedroom and Jim followed her insufficient instructions as he led Chrissy by the arm down the hall. When he reached a door in the quieter section of the house, he figured this was here Karen had indicated for him to go. He turned the handle and gently ushered Chrissy through first and was met with a rather curious sight when he flicked the light on.

Lonnie was sat on the bed, his arms snaked around a girl's waist, passionately kissing her. And when the light turned on and the pair frantically got to their feet, Jim was both surprised and relieved to find the girl wasn't Joyce.

"Fuck sake, Jim," Lonnie hissed as he hastily began to do up his fly as his partner was fixing the sleeves and buttons of her dress.

"Sorry, Lon, didn't mean to disturb," Jim couldn't contain his smirk as Lonnie glared at his use of his rarely used nickname. "What happened to Joyce, hmm?" Jim had to ask.

As he finished up composing himself, Lonnie walked toward the door that Chrissy and Jim were currently blocking. He sighed as he looked Jim up and down. "You can have her, man, the bitch is frigid anyway," Jim's mouth hung open as Lonnie spat venom about Joyce. "Besides," he flashed a look at Chrissy and arched an eyebrow at Jim. "I know how much you just love my sloppy seconds."

It took everything in Jim's body not to lunge at Lonnie right there and then. And when Lonnie winked and clicked his teeth at Chrissy before grabbing the hand of the girl behind him and leading her away, Jim took three deep breaths to compose himself. Lonnie could wait, he could kick that dick's ass anytime. But right now, after he'd put Chrissy to bed and made sure she was lying on her side, his main

priority was finding Joyce.

With Chrissy sleeping soundly, Jim marched out of the bedroom and his eyes went to the staircase. He'd seen her go upstairs not long before so he figured she'd still be there. Bounding up the stairs quickly, he scanned the second floor rooms and spotted that only one door was opened slightly. Figuring it was his best bet, he crept into the room, which turned out to be Karen's bedroom, he looked over the room and saw no trace of her. That was until he noticed the window that was opened all the way.

Panic began to set in as he raced to the other side of the room and stuck his head out the window.

"Joyce?!" Jim yelled and found himself scanning the ground, no real reason why in the hell he thought Joyce's would've actually jumped out the window.

"Over here, chief," a gentle voice called out to him from his right. He turned his head to find Joyce perched neatly on the slant of the roof, holding a beer on her skirt and contently looking out at the view without a care in the world.

"Joyce, what the hell are you doing out there?" Jim didn't realise he'd let out a relieved sigh until he spoke.

She turned her head and looked at him, her eyes lit up and she waved him over. "Hey come here and look at this," she gestured with her head now, calling him over.

"Are you kidding?"

"Are you a pussy?"

With that, Jim quickly dropped his leg out of the window and carefully scaled the roof before gently plopping down next to Joyce. "Alright what do I need to look at?"

"Look," she pointed out into the darkness and Jim saw it then. The lights of the suburbs looked as though the houses were reflecting the stars. The calm night air made everything seem so still, no wind, no hassle, their little town looked completely frozen in time. "It's

beautiful right,” Joyce observed and while Jim did agree, it probably was the nicest he’d ever seen the town look, he had turned his head to Joyce. He was in awe of the calm and enamoured expression on her face, her mouth open in amazement, the corners of her lips curling upward into a little, excited smile. It really was beautiful.

But then he remembered the reason he’d come to find her.

“Joyce,” Jim cleared his throat and looked away from her and down at his hands. He couldn’t bare to look at her when he told her. “Lonnie, he, uh..”

“Is making out with that blonde girl?” Joyce finished his question about as casually as enquiring what was for lunch that day. His head whipped round to find that she was looking up intently at the stars now, her expression unchanged.

“You know?” he drew his head back in confusion. “But you don’t seem upset?”

She shrugged and continued to look upward as she furrowed her brow. “Why would I be?” she took a drink of her beer before lowering her head and looking at Jim with an oddly reassuring face. “You think I didn’t already know what he was like?”

“But you came here with him...”

“Yeah cause he asked me to,” Joyce excused, her eyes left his for a moment as she quietly muttered between her teeth. “It’s not like anyone else was going to.”

He chose to ignore that, scared he’d thought the wrong thing of it.
“But why did you say yes? If you knew what..”

“Cause he’s my friend, Jim,” she insisted and suddenly Hopper felt like he’d been kicked somehow. It was the first time he realised he didn’t like her calling him his actual name.

He snorted then. “Since when were you two friends?” he sneered as he pulled out a cigarette and placed it in his mouth.

“Since he came to visit me in Chicago.”

The cigarette in Hopper's mouth fell into his lap as his jaw dropped and he stared wide eyed at Joyce. "What?" he nearly yelled.

Joyce laughed for a second before she pulled out a lighter from her clutch bag next to her and reached over to light Hopper's cigarette. "Three times actually. We stayed in touch when I left. He came to visit me. It was nice to see him," she said it so simply, like it wasn't ground breaking information.

Suddenly the clogs began to turn in his head and he felt himself inwardly gasp.

"Wait a second, was Lonnie the guy you..."

"What? Oh, no, no! God no!" Joyce shook her head with a slight laugh. "Although I'm pretty sure that's what he kept hoping for whenever he did come to visit."

Jim could only look ahead wide eyed. He tried so hard to process the information he had been dealt but still couldn't wrap his head around it. He felt a wave of guilt wash over him. Lonnie fucking Byers had kept in touch with Joyce while she was in Chicago. Hell, he'd even visited her. And yet Hopper had never had the balls to even write her a letter. He felt like a dick. But nevertheless, Lonnie was still Lonnie.

"He doesn't deserve you, Joyce," he genuinely hadn't meant the words to leave his mouth that caused Joyce to quickly look around at him in shock. Fuck it, he'd said it, it was out in the open now. When Joyce didn't say anything, just continued to look at him, he figured he should probably elaborate before he really embarrassed himself. He cleared his throat. "I mean, you're a good person, Joyce, and he's... he's just not. You could do a lot better." He said begrudgingly while he took a drag.

She was quiet for a moment as she looked away from him in thought. "Is that so?" Joyce rhetorically asked. "Then what kind of guy do I deserve, Jim Hopper?" she asked, an exciting playfulness in her voice that Jim regarded as dangerous.

He looked round at her, taken aback by her tone to find her staring up at him with sparkling, waiting eyes. He exhaled with a shaky

breath as he felt his stomach do loops. “Well,” he licked his lips in thought for a moment and tried to ignore the way Joyce’s eyes had fallen to his mouth as he did so. “You deserve someone who realises just how funny you are,” he chuckled at that, causing Joyce to let out a small giggle. “You deserve someone who appreciates that stupid little giggle of yours,” her eyes were glistening at him now. “Someone who likes the fact that, although you try to hide it, nine times out of ten you’re the smartest person in the room.” She tucked a loose strand of hair behind her ear nervously. “Someone who thinks it’s really god damn adorable whenever you do that...” she froze and looked up at him. It was then that Jim realised how close her face was to his now, leaning up to him. On instinct, Jim began to lower his head to her.

“Someone who knows how beautiful you are...”

He’d trailed off as he and Joyce were inches apart now. And when she closed her eyes in anticipation, Jim’s heart beat so fast he thought it was going to burst. His palms were sweating and his breathing out of tune. He hadn’t known just how much he had wanted to press his lips against her until now. He had known his feelings towards her had significantly changed since she got back, he was just completely unaware of the direction they had taken. It all made sense in that moment. The anger towards Lonnie touching her, the contagious smiles and laughs, the fact that those smoke breaks between fifth and six had become his favourite part of the day, the way he got so nervous around her. It had all fallen into place.

He smirked to himself as he inched closer to her and closed his eyes. But as he did so, he saw it.

The memory replayed in his head like a memory. Joyce screaming and crying in class, her throwing everything at her disposal. The teachers flooding into the room to console her and failing. Jim calling out to her, but Joyce just continued to scream and scream and scream...

He sharply pulled back and Joyce’s eyes flashed open in confusion.

“I can’t do this...” Jim sighed, raking his hand through his hair in frustration. “It’s not right..”

He couldn't look at her, but he saw the anger in her face in the corner of his eye.

"How is it 'not right'?" Joyce seethed through her teeth, frustration latent in her voice.

"Because..." Jim trailed off, scrambling in his head for a good excuse that wasn't the true one. "I'm with Chrissy..."

Joyce scoffed in disbelief. "Chrissy? You don't even like her!"

"Hey you don't know that," Jim intercepted in defence.

"Like hell I do! You can barely fucking stand her, she's not right for you and you know it!" her voice was getting louder.

"You don't... look you don't even know the person I am now," Jim tried to excuse, unconvincingly.

"Yeah and who's fault is that?" she had echoed the words from the first night they had caught up. It was then he realised she hadn't been joking. She'd shrugged it off as a joke, but he knew now that that wasn't how she truly felt. Turns out she was in fact hurt that he didn't stay in contact with her. "Just stop lying and tell me."

"It's Chrissy, Joyce," he sighed in frustration. Why couldn't she just accept this excuse and move on?

"Bullshit."

"It's not bullshit, I want to be with her..."

"Bullshit."

"Look, Joyce, you don't get it"

"Bullshit."

"For Christ's sake I-

"Bullshit."

"Can't you just try and understand-"

“BULLSHIT!”

“BECAUSE I DON’T WANT TO TAKE ADVANTAGE OF YOU!” when she had screamed at him, that had been it. His temper had snapped and the truth had come out. She edged away from him in a moment and looked away in thought, completely perplexed by his outburst.

“Take advantage? That’s insane I’ve barely had anything to dr...” she had looked down at the beer bottle in her lap when it hit her. “Oh...”

All his anger had dissipated when he had heard the sadness in her realisation. He wanted to throw himself off the roof in that moment.

Joyce was on her feet then and walking across him. “Joyce wait...” he called after her. But she wouldn’t wait, she was already half way through the window.

Jim sprung to his feet and followed her through the window, just catching her as she reached the door to Karen’s bedroom door. He leapt forward and caught her by the arm, stopping her.

“Joyce, please give me a minute to-“

She had spun round then and Jim felt his heart shatter. Tears of frustration were leaking from her eyes and Hopper had never seen a sadder sight. She snatched her arm back and held it upward trying to find in the words in the midst of her crying.

“You wanna know why I reached out to you when I came back?” her voice was cracking and strangled, like her heart was in her throat. “Because I thought,” she let out a struggled breath in what could have been misconstrued as a small laugh. “I thought that after everything that had happened, you would be the one person who would treat me the same. That you would look at like I was an actual person, not like everyone else who looked at me and just saw...” she stopped herself, fearing that the next words out of her mouth would only cause her to cry out even more. Instead she clutched a hand over her heart, holding back a sob.

“Joyce, please...” he wasn’t even sure what to say then, his eyes pleading with sympathy and desperation.

She shook her head. "No, Hop, I don't want this. I don't want your sympathy, I don't want your pity..." she took a deep breath and Hopper couldn't do anything but stare at the ground in shame. "I just wanted you." His eyes snapped up then. He'd never seen her look so small, so vulnerable and so heartbroken.

He took an involuntarily step toward her and held his arms out to her but she took a step back, pulling on the door handle, readying her exit. She took another breath to compose herself.

"Just go back to your girlfriend, Jim," she tore her eyes away from him. Took one last look at the ground before heading out the door.

It took Hopper a couple of minutes to realise how much of an idiot he had been. Did he really pity her the way she had insinuated? No of course he didn't. He didn't know why that image had flashed in his head before he almost kissed her. But he knew now that he didn't care about that. Joyce had changed, she was this strong, confident, beautiful woman that Hopper couldn't help but do anything but admire. So why hadn't he said that when she was stood crying in front of him just moments ago? Knowing now what he wanted to say, he'd raced down stairs back into the party, desperately trying to find her.

But she was already gone.

5. Hard to Say I'm Sorry

Summary for the Chapter:

Hopper has some apologising to do.

Notes for the Chapter:

Hey so I thought I'd finally write from Joyce's point of view, hurray! This chapter gives a little bit of an insight into her home life and her feelings towards Hopper. Also side note, I know David Harbour (a.k.a. King of the Jopper ship) posted the 'high school yearbook', and as much as I love this man's canon, this story does kind of differ from that, i.e. the year and Joyce's last name, and I just figured I'd gone this far already no turning back now! I do have a timeline mapped out which I THINK makes sense. Anywho, onward with the chapter, I hope you enjoy!

Chapter title is taken from the song 'Hard to Say I'm Sorry' by Chicago

It had been two weeks since Joyce had heard from Jim Hopper. Well, that wasn't entirely true. She had heard him fine well shouting her name down the hallway at school, chasing after her before she disappeared into the crowd of students. She'd seen him snooping around the stairs between fifth and sixth, looking for her while she hid round the corner by the disposal units. It smelled like shit but at least it meant she didn't have to face the awkwardness of his confrontation. Joyce had been surprised the first time her father had told her Hopper had been round the house looking for her. When it got to the fourth time, she had started to feel guilt, but it was quickly surpassed by the reminder of the sinking feeling of his rejection.

But the truth was, Joyce wasn't upset that he had rejected her. She had known he had a girlfriend, she had known that he most likely valued their friendship more than any sort of pursuit of something more. She had known that him turning her down was a possibility when she'd made her move. That in itself was a surprise to her all

together. When she had returned to Hawkins and sought out his friendship, she had never imagined the romantic feelings that would develop within her. She hadn't actually considered it until they were sat there on the roof. The way those piercing blue eyes had looked at her and he'd told her what she deserved. It had struck her like a bolt of lightning so she'd figured she'd give it a shot.

What had hurt was his reason. She had been naïve to think he wouldn't see past what had happened to her. After all, he'd witnessed it first-hand. But there had still been that hope there that the boy who'd known her since she was six would just see her as the same old friend she had always been. But even Joyce had to admit she had changed. And it was all because of what had happened, she couldn't ignore it. But Lord knew she would at least try to.

Which was why she couldn't get over that gut wrenching feeling of embarrassment when Hopper had told her he didn't want to take advantage of her. She'd felt like a child, like a sorry case, like a stupid girl that needed protection, like she was being looked down on. It had washed over her, she had bathed in it. The feeling had blurred her vision, made her unable to see sense and really try to understand where he had been coming from. And though she had understood now since that night, whenever she thought about it, that feeling would creep up on her and make her insides tighten, and then she was inwardly cringing all over again.

And seeing Hopper, talking to him would just be even worse.

One day, ten days after it had happened, she had heard the doorbell from her bedroom. She had been lost in thought, away in a day dream listening to her mother's old Billie Holiday records, her mind occasionally drifting to Hopper when a lyric plucked at her heart strings, so she absentmindedly wandered to the door humming to herself. It wasn't till she was five feet from the door she saw the tall figure behind the stain glass door that she panicked and dipped into the living room just off the hall and hid behind the wall. She was thankful the drapes were closed.

"Thought you were getting that?" her father's voice coming from the corner of the room had made her jump with fright.

“Jesus, Dad,” she had gasped, holding a hand to her heart.

“Language, Joycie,” he murmured in a half-ass scolding. He was sitting in his favourite chair reading a fishing book, his eyes not leaving the page. “Why’d you not answer the door?”

“Cause, y’know, it’s uh... um, it’s...”

“That Hopper kid again?” his eyes lifted to her, peering over the rim of his glasses. Joyce simply nodded quickly. He sighed and stood from his chair, tucking his glasses in his shirt pocket. “Same as last time?” he sighed again, making his way to the door as the doorbell rang again. Joyce could only nod again. “Well, alright.”

Joyce listened as her father answered the door as it creaked inward. It had needed fixed years ago but her father figured it worked just fine. “It keeps the warmth in and the cold out, so what’s the problem?” he had excused when her mother started hounding him to get it fixed. Joyce had laughed at the exchange at the time.

“Ahh, hello James,” her father feigned surprise which was most likely not going to convince Hopper, considering how often he’d stopped by the house.

“Good evening, Mr Donnelly,” Hopper’s usual gruff voice had been replaced by what sounded to be his best attempt to be polite. “Is Joyce home?”

“No I don’t believe so. Something about going out for a walk,” her father expertly lied, despite the fact it was raining outside and Joyce’s jacket was still hung up on the hanger in full view of the doorway.

Hopper had hesitated for a moment. “Hmm, I see. Say, I didn’t know you were such a Billie Holiday fan?” Joyce could practically hear the arching eyebrow in his tone.

Her father stuttered for a moment, clearly taken off guard and Joyce waited in anticipation for his reply. “Yeah, um, big fan.”

There was a pause and for a moment, Joyce had thought Hopper had really believed her father’s pure attempt to sound enthusiastic about

jazz when in reality he couldn't stand it. But he'd put up with it for her mother's sake, considering how much she had loved jazz music.

"She's hiding in the living room isn't she?" Hopper had countered with and Joyce felt every nerve in her body stiffen, her heart was beating like crazy and her breath had hitched. How the hell did he know?

When her father didn't answer, she assumed that he had nodded, considering the heavy sigh that came from Hopper in the doorway.

"Okay, well, uh, can you please tell her just to call me?" Joyce felt a pang in her chest at the hinted desperation in his voice.

When her father said his goodbyes to Hopper, Joyce slumped against the wall. The guilt overtook her and she stared silently at the ground. She thought about running out the door after him but couldn't bring her feet to move. She knew she was being ridiculous. And then as if on cue, she was reliving the embarrassment all over again. The urge to run after him, gone.

"That boy is getting too damn familiar with the this house," her father grumbled as he shuffled back into the living room. He turned to face his daughter. Joyce remembered seeing her father for the first time since she got back to Hawkins. Before she had left, Jonathan Donnelly had been a tall, well-built man, his wife keeping him well fed and happy, never seen without a kind, small smile on his face. After Joyce's year in Chicago, when she came home she had been shocked by her father's appearance. He was skinny, tired, no trace of that small smile she loved. His hair had thinned, and he'd almost shrunk. It was the first time in her life that Joyce thought he looked old.

Her father had worked at the fishing supplies store most of his life and had never even made the leap to manager. This meant that their life had been a meagre one, her mother even taking up working out of the house as a seamstress for hire to earn a little extra cash. But despite their low earnings and less than luxurious lifestyle, their house had been a happy one. When Joyce had asked her father years previous after a hard day at work if he ever thought about getting a different job, he had said so long as he was home every night for

dinner with his family, he was happy. Joyce had known that happiness would disappear after their mother's death. While Jonathan Donnelly loved his children, Joyce and her two older brothers, his wife had always been his rock.

"Y'know you should probably talk to him," her father rubbed his neck and looked down at Joyce who refused to meet his eyes, a scowl on her face.

"I will when I'm ready," Joyce frowned and glared at the ground, wishing her father wouldn't actually talk to her about this.

"Well I hope that's soon," he sighed as he shuffled back to his chair. "Cause if word gets out I like Billie Holiday, you'll be out on your ass in a heartbeat."

Joyce chuckled at him. While he didn't have a lot of happiness left in him, she was glad he still had some reserved for his daughter.

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Sometime later, Joyce had found herself too preoccupied to think about Jim Hopper on account of the fact she now had a job. Her father had managed to secure her a job at the Hammond's diner and she had eagerly accepted. True she had been reluctant at first, knowing fine well it was Benny's father's diner, thinking it would pose a risk of running into Hopper. But then she had remembered him telling her that they didn't like to go to the diner, that Benny and Hopper thought Benny's dad was a dick and they tried to avoid the diner as much as possible.

After her first few shifts, she had come to actually like working there. The other waitresses were older than herself, and they were kind to her. The cooks and busboys looked at her like many other men did, spent more time looking at her legs and chest that made her rather uncomfortable but most of the time when they spoke to her their jaws were too busy on the floor to say anything harsh or mean so she didn't mind too much. The Mr. Hammond, well, he had been just as Hopper had said. A dick.

It was the Friday late afternoon shift, the diner was surprisingly

quiet. Joyce had put it down to the shitty weather outside. Most of the patrons were more people passing through to escape the rain rather than the regulars. She was half way through her shift when Loretta, a woman well into her late fifties who moved much too quickly for her age, had come up to her asking for her to take the booth by the window after a child had made a complete mess of her previous table. Joyce had smiled and said it was no problem. Loretta had been more than helpful to Joyce, so she was happy to return the favour.

From a distance, she could see it was only one person at the table, didn't seem like too much trouble. She was fetching her pad and pen from the apron and flicking through to find an empty page when she reached the table and clicked her pen.

"Hi there, what can I get y..."

She trailed off when she looked up and found Jim Hopper sitting up the table, staring up at him with those stupid blue eyes and pretty face, a shy smile on his face.

Joyce's face immediately fell into a frown. "What're you doing here?"

"Well, Benny told me you'd started working here so I—"

"What do you want, Jim?" she groaned as she held up her hand to her forehead, rubbing it in irritation and squeezing her eyes shut, praying for something to take her way from this moment.

"A cheeseburger with a side of your forgiveness would be nice..."

She scoffed and turned away from him to go back to the table she had been clearing when Loretta had come up to her and asked for help. She frantically began stacking glasses and plates onto her previously discarded tray as she heard Hopper jump up from the table and follow her.

"Joyce, please, can you just listen to me for a sec?" Hopper insisted as he stood next to her, placing his fingers on the table, towering over her as he always did.

"I'm working, Hop," she waved him off as she continued to clean the

table, trying hard not to look up at him.

“Ah-ha! See you called me ‘Hop’, you’re not mad at me!” he pointed at her, matter-of-factly.

She looked up then, her eyes slits as she glared at him, her nose scrunched up as it normally did when she was angry. It didn’t help that he was grinning like a fool at her, that ridiculous grin that made her stomach flip.

“Okay, you’re still mad,” Hopper’s smile disappeared when Joyce didn’t say anything and just continued to glare at him. “Look, Joyce, I can’t even begin to tell you how so-“

“What? How *sorry* you are?” she sneered at him. Her tone made Hopper flinch, his eyebrows raising in surprise. “I don’t care how sorry you are, Hopper! It’s going to take a lot more than sorry for me to forget how shitty you made me feel!” she realised her voice had began to get louder in her anger and tried to calm herself down before she made a scene. She moved her attention back to the task at hand and began to furiously wipe the table down.

“I never meant to hurt you, trust me it’s the last thing I wanted to do,” he said softly but still with the same desperation she had heard in his voice just three days before when he’d come to the door looking for her. She ignored the same guilty feeling again this time.

“Well, guess what you still did,” she sighed.

He ran a hand through his hair in irritation. He clicked his neck and attempted to stay calm. “Can we please just be friends again?” he genuinely asked. When she looked up at him his eyes were baring into hers the same way they had that night on the roof and Joyce felt like she could just fall right there.

She tore her eyes away from him in a feeble attempt to shake off the warm feeling that was forming within her. She finished loading the tray and began to back away from him.

“You hurt me, Hop. Just because you didn’t mean to, doesn’t change the fact that you did. You embarrassed me,” she stared him down,

even when his eyes broke from hers and he hung his head in shame. “You made me feel like a charity case when all I wanted you to do was see me as I really am,” she took a deep breath as she tried not to cry. When he heard her shaky intake of breath he looked up at her with concern and sadness plastered on his face. “You made me feel like a an idiot. Friends don’t do that to each other. So stop coming to my house, stop calling after me at school, and just leave me alone!”

As she spun round in a tantrum, so preoccupied with her rage that she didn’t notice the wet floor sign. Her tennis shoes skidded against the floor, the tray in her hand completely unbalancing her, sending her flying. She landed with a harsh thud followed by a loud smash.

“Joyce!” Hopper had shouted before rushing over to her aide but she barely heard him.

Turning over and pulling herself onto her knees she looked upon the mess she’d made. Glasses and plates had shattered, not one item on her tray hadn’t smashed into pieces. Looking up she saw that every one of the patrons and staff were looking directly at her. And then it started again. The weight on her chest practically crushing her, her hands shaking, her lip trembling, the weakness in her limbs.

“Shit, Joyce, are you okay?” despite him crouched right in front of her, Hopper’s voice seemed a mile away. When she startled scrambling to gather the pieces of broken glass and ceramic, he put his hand over her quavering fingers. “Joyce, you’re gonna cut yourself.”

“I need to... I need to clean this,” her voice was uneven and quiet, like she wasn’t answering, just muttering incoherently to herself. “I’ll... he’ll get.... Fired,” her eyes widened at the last word left her lips. Her breathing began to become erratic.

“Joyce, it’s okay don’t worry,” Hopper tightened his grip on Joyce’s hand in an attempt to get her to look at him. Instead she just kept gasping and shaking. “Joyce, hey come on, just breathe. Joyce, it’s okay, breathe,” he lifted his hand to her cheek and her eyes met his. Her eyes were wide and watery. He felt his heart sink, she looked like a deer in headlights.

“What the hell’s going on here?!” Mr. Hammond’s voice made Joyce jump and she immediately pushed herself onto her feet. Mr. Hammond was a large man, much like his son, with an intimidating presence even when he was just standing idly by. But right now, with his hands on his hips and nostrils flaring, he looked furious. And therefore ten times more terrifying.

“Mr. Hammond I...”

“It was my fault, sir,” Hopper rushed to his feet. Joyce looked to Hopper, confusion written all over her face. He didn’t look at her and kept his eyes on Mr. Hammond. “I tripped Joyce and she fell. I’m sorry.”

Mr. Hammond crossed his arms and looked Hopper up and down. “And why would you do that?”

Hopper hesitated and his eyes drifted to Joyce for a fleeting moment as he stuttered for an excuse. “I thought it’d be funny,” was the best he could come up with.

Mr. Hammond snorted passive aggressively. “Well your little joke just cost me money,” Mr. Hammond scolded Hopper, making him stare at his feet. “You’re lucky I like your dad so much, James,” Hopper tried hard not to roll his eyes or click his tongue at the mention of his father, choosing to accept Mr. Hammond’s bullshit excuse. “Next time you come in here, try and make it when your girlfriend isn’t on the clock.”

“And you,” he turned his attention to Joyce who looked up suddenly and put her hands behind her back, standing to attention. “You’re just lucky you bring in as many tips as you do. Now clean this up and take your ass home. And all this,” he gestured with his index finger to the mess on the floor. “Is coming out of your pay cheque,” he pointed directly at her and she felt her head dip again. He waved his hand over his shoulder, fed up with the pair of them before storming off.

Joyce turned to Hopper, slowly, in complete bewilderment. “Why’d you do that?” she asked him, looking up at him with amazement.

He smirked at her then. “Because you’re my friend, Joyce,” he

crouched down to her height and placed his hands on her shoulders, looking her directly in the eye. “And friends don’t let other friends get their asses in trouble with their other friend’s dad.”

She couldn’t help herself, she let out a snort followed by a little laugh that caused Hopper’s eyes to light up in a way she’d never seen before. He grinned at her with a smile that reached his eyes. “So whaddaya say, Donnelly,” he let go of her shoulders and straightened his back, causing her to lift her head to look at his face. “Friends again?” he held out his hand to her.

She considered saying no to him. Telling him she was still hurt about everything, him not writing to her, the mortifying realisation that he still pitied her after all this time. But then she took a look at his face. This self-proclaimed ‘badass’ was smiling at her like a total goof, holding his hand out to her like some square meeting an authority figure. She couldn’t help but feel her heart-warming as his bright blue eyes twinkled at her.

Rolling her eyes, she smiled at him, making his already impossibly large grin only grow. She reached out and gently shook his hand.

“Friends,” she agreed. Eventually returning his ridiculous smile.

6. So Lost Without You

Summary for the Chapter:

Joyce gets a little carried away at the school pep rally.

Notes for the Chapter:

I'M SO SORRY I HAVEN'T UPDATED IN SO LONG
I've been super caught up in writing oneshots after
hitting a bit of snag with this chapter, but
nonetheless I still want to continue with this story so
please don't think I have abandoned this! Please
enjoy this chapter!

For the third time that week, Hopper, Benny, Joyce and Richie were sitting in the bleachers watching the cheerleaders practise for the pep rally on Friday. Chrissy had insisted Hopper come watch and wait for her after school. She had told him she wanted him there for 'support' but he knew the truth of the matter was Chrissy didn't trust him to be alone with Joyce. He shrugged it off, thinking her ridiculous but that didn't change the fact that the pair had almost kissed and had technically both admitted they had feelings for each other. But ever since becoming friends with her again more than two weeks ago, they never spoke about it or even acknowledged it. They just carried on same as before.

So he had agreed to keep her happy. Benny had gone with him, Hopper put that down to a secret crush Benny had had on Karen since the third grade. Richie and Joyce eventually decided to tag along purely cause they had nothing better to do. They sat scattered amongst the bleachers, Hopper leaning back against the chair behind him, Benny sitting forward on the row in front, sitting forward attentively, Richie was sat two rows in front to the left of them, lying sprawled across the bench, sleeping. Joyce was lying down with her head next to Hopper's thigh, eyes closed under her sunglasses, knees up, enjoying some of the last of the summer sun. Hopper tried hard to ignore that he could see right down her shirt and tried to focus on Chrissy's routine.

His concentration was interrupted when Joyce let out a bored sigh.

“Hop, you got a light?” she asked, not opening her eyes as she reached into her trouser pocket and pulled out a cigarette.

“Yeah sure,” he mumbled, reaching into his jacket pocket and pulling out his zippo. He handed it to her waiting hand, keeping his eyes as far away from her shirt. She mumbled a thanks as she moved her legs around to sit and lit up.

With an exhale, she turned to Hopper. “Well this is really fucking fun,” she groaned.

Hopper chuckled. “C’mom, it’s not that bad,” he tried to bargain but he couldn’t help but agree with her.

Joyce snorted in disbelief. “Jesus, Hop, we’ve watched them twirl and shake their pompoms in the same way for the past hour. Do they really need to practise it all over and over again?”

Hopper knew she had a point and refused to counter, as per usual, Joyce was right. But he had made a commitment to Chrissy and he was intent on keeping it. But he had to admit to himself that when Joyce lifted her sun glasses and flashed him a look of ‘you can’t be serious’, he felt the temptation to leave it all behind and run away with Joyce to the lake, or the diner or just anywhere else in Hawkins so long as he was with her.

He immediately drew back the smile he didn’t realise had stretched across his mouth, this was dangerous far too dangerous.

“So are we going to the rally on Friday? Because Lonnie said a bunch of them-“

“I can’t believe you’re still talking to him,” Hopper shook his head as Joyce handed him the cigarette and he took a draw, staring straight ahead across the field. Joyce didn’t bite and instead shrugged her shoulders, especially when she never actually had an explanation as to why she was still talking to Lonnie. “But yes, we are going to the rally.”

Joyce let out a large, exasperated and over the top groan of defeat

and boredom, slumping down on the bench. The exaggerated gesture made Hopper chuckle, coughing as he exhaled.

“You know you don’t *have* to come right?” he raised an eyebrow at her that only made Joyce give him a disbelieving expression.

“And spend Friday night cooped up alone watching my dad clean his fishing gear or whatever the hell it is he does? Please, I’d rather watch Chrissy bounce around in front of a bonfire chanting nonsense, at least I can get a good laugh out of it,” she grumbled and then squealed when Hopper jabbed her in the side.

“Hey! That’s my girlfriend you’re talking about there, Donnelly,” he gave her a scolding look, but the mischievous twinkle in his eyes let her know he was kidding around. She laughed as he handed her the cigarette.

“Well, if we’re going to go to this thing, do we really have to be sober for it?” Joyce suggested, taking a draw.

Hopper looked around to her then with a stunned expression. “Umm, what the hell happened to little Joycie Donnelly, who one time threatened to call the cops when she saw her own brother trying to sneak a bottle of sherry out of the family liquor cabinet?”

Joyce snorted at the memory. “What can I say? I’ve seen things, man, I’ve *changed*,” she put on a mocking male tone, sounding eerily like anyone they had encountered who had returned from overseas.

Hopper laughed at that before looking down at their sleeping friend two benches down. “Hey, Richie!” Hopper shouted down to him but he didn’t budge. “Rich!” he yelled again. Still no response. “Richaaaaaaay!”

When Richie still didn’t move, Joyce stuck two fingers in her mouth and let out a high pitched whistle that rung uncomfortably through Hopper’s ear drums. The cheerleaders immediately stopped their routine, looking up to the bleachers with disapproving glances that Joyce didn’t seem to notice “Richie ya shit wake up!” she called out to him, successfully waking the comatose young man.

“Dammit Joyce, what?!” he called back, irritation latent in his voice that made Joyce smile victoriously as she gestured her head to Hopper, indicating for him to finally speak.

“Rich you think you can score some booze for Friday night?” Hopper asked, not so much yelling this time now that Richie was conscious.

Richie mouth stretched into a dopey grin, his mood instantly uplifted. “You betcha, Jimmy boy!”

However two days later, when Friday evening rolled around, Richie had proven them wrong, leaving ‘Jimmy boy’ to lift a shitty bottle of whiskey from his father’s public collection, knowing better to steal from his private, personal collection he kept locked away in his office. They had gathered in the woods, not too far from the rally but far enough so that they were out of sight, starting their own mini fire. It was Benny, Richie, Joyce, Hopper all sat around the campfire, laughing as they sipped, and tried not to hurl, at the taste of the less than stellar whiskey.

Chrissy had scowled when Hopper had said he wouldn’t be able to pick her up for the rally, neglecting to tell her his plans of going out with his friends and get drunk prior to her self-proclaimed ‘big night’. He had shrugged it off and drove off, intent on getting to his friends. When he arrived he realised he was the last to join the party, with Benny wrapping him in a bone crushing bear hug and Joyce looking up at him with a tipsy, dopey grin.

“Hey, it’s Ja-James Hopper everybody!” she hiccupped as she lifted up a cup filled with what he had later learned was red wine she had snagged from her father. He had nudged her with a smirk at the use of his much hated full name.

After a couple hours of drinking and talking trash, Hopper looked over to Joyce who was now drinking the whiskey from the bottle. When she finished her sip she rocked back on the log next to him and he instinctively reached out to catch her but she had steadied herself at the last minute, shaking her head with that same dopey grin she had flashed him when she arrived.

“Alright, Joycie I think you’ve had enough,” Hopper chuckled as he

reached for the bottle.

Her eyes widened and she quickly snatched the bottle close to her chest just as Hopper's fingers were about to grasp it from her. She quickly stood up, far too fast for someone as intoxicated as her, causing Hopper to lurch forward slightly.

"Ah bah bah baaaah! Sharing is caring, Hop!" she pointed at him accusingly, holding the bottle as far away from him as she could.

He couldn't keep the smile from his face as he basked in her ridiculousness. "Yeah, Joyce, and you don't seem to be sharing with anyone else by the looks of it," he arched a brow at her, countering her.

She thought for a moment, the search for a comeback evident on her face as she furrowed her brows in concentration. Hopper found himself shaking his head at her, even in her drunken stupor she looked threateningly adorable.

"Yeah, well you want your precious bottle back, ya best come get it Hopper!" she raised a brow, challenging him.

He gave her an unconvinced look. "I'm not gonna run after ya, Joyce."

"What? Scared you'll be outrun by someone half your size?" she mocked him in a sing song tone that made his mouth straighten. "Is it cause you're just a fucking chicken? Or have all those burger's at Benny's dad's place got to you?" she let out a giggle as Hopper's eyebrows hit the roof. She screamed then when Hopper got up from his seat and made a lunge for her.

As suspected, it didn't take him long to catch her. She was a tiny thing after all with short legs and Hopper was quite the football player up until last year, not that he needed to be to catch her. However, he didn't anticipate slipping on a damp leaf and falling to the ground with Joyce in his arms. Joyce landed on her back beneath him and Hopper managed to hold his arms out and break his fall before falling on top of her and likely crushing her.

She let out a relentless laugh as she looked up at Hopper's startled face who was now panting heavily as a result of the fall.

"Smooth moves, Hop," she snorted when Hopper frowned at her. He saw the sparkle of something in her eye as she looked up at him, regarding him.

She then reached and placed a quick peck on his cheek, startling him more than the fall. Hopper watched in delight as the colour rushed to Joyce's cheeks and she smirked at him. He found himself bringing a hand up to face and brushing a strand of hair from her eyes and tucking it behind her ear, resting his hand on her cheek, smiling at her.

It was when Benny let out an obvious cough that the spell Hopper was under was over. He quickly jumped up and extended his hands out to Joyce to help her up. He looked to Benny who was flashing him a knowing look. While Benny had made it clear to Hopper some time ago that he much preferred Joyce to Chrissy, Benny was still a honourable man, who felt sometimes that he needed to remind his friend that he did in fact have a girlfriend. Hopper frowned back at his friend as he led Joyce back to the log and sat her down next to him.

He pulled out a cigarette and lit it. He quickly inhaled before passing it to Joyce who put her lips around it while she looked ahead, appearing deep in thought. When Joyce let out an unprovoked laugh, he turned to her with a questioning look. She caught sight of it and her smile only grew.

"If only my mother could see me now!" she let out a happy sigh as she exhaled.

Hopper chuckled. "What do you mean?"

"Sitting in the woods, drinking stolen whiskey and smoking death sticks with Jim Hopper," she snorted, her face a picture of mixed disbelief and joy.

"Hey, what's that supposed to mean? Your mom loves me!" Hopper insisted.

“Love-d,” she corrected in a blunt tone.

Hopper’s face fell. For a moment there, in amongst Hopper’s intoxication and Joyce’s laughter, he had forgotten that Joyce’s mother had in fact passed away. He realised then that it had been easy for him to forget, giving how happy Joyce had appeared recently, and especially considering how Joyce never, ever spoke of her. It was a reality he himself hadn’t had to really get used to, he had been close to the Donnelly family when he was a kid, but as he and Joyce went into separate friend groups at the start of high school, he found himself not really seeing a lot of Mrs Donnelly. He had gone to the funeral, worn his brother’s old suit that he left behind when he moved out, watched as her casket was lowered, seen the utter heartbreak on Jonathan Donnelly’s face and then looked across to Joyce. She had looked so much younger then, her hair shorter in a bob, dressed conservatively in a black dress with a white collar, cross dangling from her neck. Perfect image of the church girl she had once been.

He remembered she had looked at her mother’s grave with an unreadable expression, almost as if she didn’t have one at all. Her face was robotic, no tears fell from her eyes, her lip did not tremble. He had thought it odd considering mostly everyone else was crying, except her. He had found himself walking over to her, despite his own father’s quiet protest that he stay where he was, and made his way to her side. She didn’t flinch when he got to her, she just kept staring. Hopper had bent down, still so much taller than her, and looped his fingers through hers. She didn’t react at first, her hand cold and stiff in his own. But then she had wrapped her fingers into his grasp and squeezed his hand firmly. He had noticed a few tears leave her eyes then, but he wouldn’t have categorised it as crying.

And now when he looked over to her, her face only illuminated by the embers of the fire in front of him. She wore that same expressionless expression as she stared into the orange glow.

“Joyce, I—“

“Do you think she can?” she cut him off sharply and looked at him, her eyes inquisitive.

Hopper blinked at her. “What?”

“See me? I mean, if you believe in that sort of thing?” his heart broke a little as he noted the small glimmer of hope in her eyes.

He gave her a small smile in return, placing his hand on her knee and giving it a gentle squeeze. “Sure, if you believe in that sort of thing,” he assured her.

She returned his small smile and looked back to the fire, with Hopper swearing he could see a ghost of sadness play on her face before she went back to grinning like a fool and sipping whiskey like it was apple juice.

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About a half hour and several drinks later, everyone was relatively wasted as they stumbled over to the rally. They found a spot amongst the students with a clear view of where Chrissy and Karen and the rest of the cheerleaders would be coming out to perform their routine. Coach Roberts was currently giving a rousing speech about ‘pride’ and ‘spirit’ that made Hopper scoff.

As much as he had enjoyed playing football in his early days of high school, Coach Roberts had definitely been his least favourite part of the game. Yet another asshole who loved to compare Jim to his brother, a constant reminder that he was never had been nor would he ever be as good as him. This year was the first time Hopper hadn’t signed up for football, and Roberts had made the dick move of calling Jim’s father and telling him. His father had been furious and laid into him with a wrath Hopper hadn’t felt in months. He’d resisted the urge to lay a swift right hook on Roberts’ smug face the next day at school.

His attention was quickly taken from the speech when he felt Joyce sway in front of him. Quickly reacting, he placed his hands on her hips and steadyng her. He leaned forward and asked her if she was alright, and she responded with an indistinguishable mumble. He chuckled at her response but kept an eye on her for any further stumbling. Last thing he wanted was the pair of them getting detention for intoxication at a school event.

However the swaying ceased when the cheerleaders ran out and Joyce let out an excited cheer along with the rest of the students and started clapping. Hopper looked down at her in total confusion. She must've been pretty wasted if she was displaying genuine enthusiasm for something she had sarcastically deemed only two days ago 'really fucking fun'. But it wasn't till the cheerleaders started their chants and cheers he realised why she was so excited.

"Give them hell, give them pain! We're the bimbos with no brain, goooooo Hawkins!" Joyce cheered in unison, and almost as loud as the cheerleaders. Hopper's brows immediately raised as he stared at Joyce in pure shock. A few students looked around and laughed in response. Joyce smiled menacingly as the cheerleaders continued their routine.

"We need power, we need luck, after all our players suck! Goooooo Hawkins!" as Joyce continued her crude cheers of her own, more and more students could hear her and more and more of them found themselves bursting into hysterics. Eventually, Hopper got over the shock of his small friend yelling obscenities in front of the whole school and began laughing along with them. His laughter suddenly subsided when he caught Chrissy staring at the pair of them, Hopper's hands on Joyce's hips, making sure she didn't fall as she bounced around gleefully. She flashed daggers at Joyce and Hopper instantly felt fear for his friend. He had only seen that look on Chrissy's face a handful of times and he knew it wasn't good.

Before the cheerleaders could finish their little show, and before the teachers could notice their inebriation, Hopper applied pressure to Joyce's hips to lead her away from the crowd and towards the car park. He knew he was too wasted to drive, but they could at least hide out in his truck while they waited for Benny's brother to pick them up and hide from Chrissy at the same time.

They had just arrived at Hopper's car, Jim holding his tongue as Joyce continued her lewd mantras. They quickly stopped however when Joyce bent over and hurled the insides of her stomach onto the grass.

"Jesus!" Hopper exclaimed and jumped back in surprise. Joyce let out a horrific noise as she practically threw up a lung and Hopper's initial

shock faded into a sympathetic frown as he stepped back over to her and pulled her hair back from her face, holding it in a makeshift pony tail.

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m so sor-“ Joyce apologised relentlessly as she continued to vomit.

Hopper sniggered and rubbed her back in an assuring manner. “S’alright, Joycie, happens to all of us,” he murmured as she coughed and dry heaved, apparently finishing her spew.

He led over to the back of his truck and let the end down, carefully lifting Joyce so she could sit on the edge. He pulled himself up as Joyce leaned forward and put her head in her hands.

“Fuck sake, Hop, what have I done?” she groaned, hiding her face from him.

Hopper chuckled then and put his arms around her comfortingly. “Hey, hey, it’s okay. You know last year, I got so wasted at the Snowball that I stripped down to my family jewels and run around the whole dance hall!”

She looked up at him then with wide eyes. “Really?” she blinked at him.

He smiled then shrugged in defeat. “No, not really,” he admitted before she sighed and put her hands back over her face. “But I did get super drunk at the Snowball and threw up all over Mr Cooper’s classroom. I mean, they never caught the culprit, but I think he knows it was me.”

Joyce laughed a little at that. She pulled her hands away and went to say something when the sound of footsteps approaching grabbed her attention. At the sight of Richie, Benny, Karen, Chrissy and another cheerleader Joyce recognised as Judy Pritchett, the pair jumped down from Hopper’s truck and moved towards the group. Chrissy stormed towards them from the frown, the rage practically projecting off of her.

“What the hell was that all about, Joyce?!” Chrissy yelled, throwing

her hands in the air in frustration.

Joyce's voice was small and she stared at the ground. "Chrissy I'm so sorry I—"

"Oh don't give me that bullshit, Joyce you're not sorry! Bet you thought it was really fucking funny to absolute humiliate me up there!" Chrissy glared down at Joyce as she took a step toward her.

"Chrissy it wasn't that bad! Even you gotta admit, it was pretty funny!" Karen interjected, stepping forward but when Chrissy turned her glare onto her, Benny put an arm out in front of Karen as a precaution.

"Oh shut *up*, Karen!" Chrissy's shrill voice appeared to startle Karen who jumped a little bit. "God I am so *sick* of you defending her, I get it, you pity her but you don't have to be such a god damn wet blanket all the time!"

Karen looked between Chrissy and Joyce with a confused expression.
"Chrissy I don't pity Joyce..."

"Are you kidding me?! Of course you do, you all do! It's the only reason any of you are friends with her!" Chrissy yelled toward the group. Richie and Benny's faces stretched downward into offended frowns. When no one said anything, Chrissy turned back to Joyce.

Her eyes flashed up to Jim who was standing hunched next to Joyce, the pissed off expression on his face was usually enough to stop Chrissy's relenting bitchiness but tonight she was on a whole other level.

Joyce's eyes refused to meet Chrissy as she continued to stare at her shoes, guilt strewn all across her features. She was muttering incoherent words under her breath and Chrissy's eyebrows knotted to try and listen to what she was saying. When all she could make out was nonsense, she looked to Joyce's hands that were currently pulsing in and out of fists, her right hand often spasming slightly, outstretching her fingers in some sort of twitch.

Chrissy snorted. "Christ you really are a crazy bitch aren't you?" she

hissed at Joyce.

There was a collective gasp from the three behind Chrissy. Jim's jaw clenched, his nostrils flared and he found himself staring at Chrissy with pure shock and resentment. He then looked to Joyce's who's head whipped up and looked at Chrissy. She no longer looked like that strong young woman who had defiantly shot down Chrissy in the cafeteria a month ago. Right now, her eyes were wide and her lower lip was trembling. She looked like a deer in headlights. Hopper immediately wanted to wrap his arm around her, pull her close to him and stop her tears before they'd even began to fall.

"You know it really is a shame your mom's gone, looks like someone could really teach you some man-"

Chrissy's snide remark was cut off when Joyce stepped forward and clocked her right in the nose with a straight punch she had learned courtesy of Jonathan Donnelly's eldest son, Franklin. Chrissy recoiled with a shriek, blood already flowing from her nose before she'd even brought her hands up to cover it. She screamed insult after insult, how Joyce had made her bleed, how she would pay for this but Joyce didn't appear to be listening.

Joyce instead was looking at everyone else who staring at her with complete bewilderment, jaws on the floor. As she took in all the eyes on her, she glanced up at Hopper, tears in her eyes before running away from the group and towards the woods.

"Joyce..." he reached out after her but she didn't stop. He made a move to follow her when Chrissy called back his attention.

"Jimmy!" Chrissy screamed after him and marched over to him, pinching her bleeding nose. "Look what she did to me! I want you to take me home, now."

Jim looked her up and down. "No," he said, as though it was the only obvious response.

She raised her eyebrows at him in astonishment. "Jimmy, she's an absolute psycho, I can't believe you actually used to be friends with her."

"Not used to, Chrissy, she *is* my friend," Jim corrected. Chrissy scoffed.

"Jim did you completely miss what just happened? She attacked me!"

"You want to know what I just saw?" Hopper laughed in a way that indicated that he was really not amused in the slightest. He grasped his hands together, pressing his index fingers against his mouth before directing them at Chrissy. "I just watched my ex-girlfriend call my best friend a 'crazy bitch' and make fun of the fact her mother fucking died, then watched said ex get exactly what she deserved," Hopper stated, his mouth a straight line, not stuttering once.

Chrissy blinked at him. "Wait, *ex*!?"

"We're done here, Chrissy," he answered automatically, his gaze unwavering, ensuring she got the message. "I'm done putting up with the fact that you are an absolutely selfish bitch."

She gasped and backed away from him, completely gobsmacked. "No, no way you do *not* get to breakup with me!" she screamed at him.

Jim straightened his back and smiled at her smugly. "Funny, because I'm pretty sure I just did. Now fuck off, Chrissy."

Chrissy shrieked, utterly appalled. She backed away from him, her anger and shocked filled eyes never leaving Jim's stern face. She then turned on her heel with a huff and stormed away from the group.

Jim didn't hang around to bask in the grins of Richie and Benny, instead he ran after Joyce. He had lost sight of her but he followed in the direction she had headed right into the woods.

"Joyce!" he called out but there was no response. He continued to call her name but he never heard her call back to him. It wasn't until the panic set in within him and he began to frantically search that he heard the sharp intakes of breath and followed the noise. Sure enough as he reached the sound he found Joyce sitting by a tree with her knees pulled up to her chest, her hands in her hair, pulling harshly.

"Joyce..." he sighed as he approached her, kneeling in front of her.

Her eyes didn't meet his. Instead her chest heaved violently, her breath was shaky and she appeared to be hyperventilating. Her face lifted slightly and her eyes were squeezed shut. Her entire body was trembling as she gasped forcefully gasped, struggling to breathe properly. It took Jim back to the time he had come to the diner, when Joyce suddenly appeared disconnected from reality, her breathing uneven.

When it dawned on him that she was now in the middle of a panic attack, his eyes widened in dread, not entirely sure on what to do.

"Joyce, it's alright, I'm here," he placed his hands gently on her knees. He didn't want to touch her too much, afraid it might make things worse. "It's me, it's Hop, everything's alright just try to breathe okay?" she seemed to register his words as she quickly tried to maintain her breathing with fast inhales. "Slow, okay, Joyce, slow," he murmured encouragingly. He breathed slowly, demonstrating for her. Her eyes opened and her panicked eyes met his. As she watched him breathing, she mimicked him, closing her eyes again to concentrate.

Eventually her body stopped trembling, and she began to calm down.

When her frantic actions subsided, he cautiously brought a hand to her cheek. Her eyes flashed open and met his, tears now forming and threatening to fall.

"Joyce, talk to me, what is it?" he frowned sadly at her.

The tears began to fall then. "I miss her, Hop," she sobbed quietly in defeat. "I really miss my mom."

This time he didn't hesitate. He pulled her into his arms, resting her head on his shoulder, letting her tears stain his shirt as she sobbed softly. His chest tightened as he listen to her heart break, not sure of what to do or what to say. As she continued to cry, Hopper found tears escaping his own eyes too.